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# WHAT THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION DOESN'T GET ABOUT THE EPA AND DISASTER RESPONSE

Reports of the agency's apparent absence from Superfund sites underscores the consequences of its withdrawal from public life.

JARED KELLER · SEP 5, 2017



*A sign is posted on a fence at the Dixie Oil Processors Superfund site on September 4th, 2017, in Friendswood, Texas.*

*(Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)*

For all the turmoil and controversy that's marred the first six months of his unorthodox presidency, it seemed Donald Trump had weathered the political storm that followed Hurricane Harvey relatively well.

Sure, there were some gaffes. But, generally speaking, the Trump administration received high marks for its response to the disaster. After all, the perfect hurricane response is logistically and organizationally impossible to plan for, and Trump seemed to have, at least here, avoided a politically explosive "George Bush doesn't care about black people" moment.

But all that back-patting took a backseat over the weekend when the Associated Press reported that flooding in Houston-area Superfund sites devoted to the storage and clean-up of chemicals and pollutants could result in the spread of toxins—and Environmental Protection Agency personnel were nowhere to be found.

The EPA quickly pushed back, calling the AP report "incredibly misleading." EPA public affairs chief Liz Bowen went even a step further, positing that the AP's "yellow journalism" was

created "in an attempt to mislead Americans." The agency did, however, admit it had detected catastrophic flooding at 13 of Texas' 41 Superfund sites through "aerial imagery"; it also claimed sites were otherwise inaccessible, despite the AP's independent survey of seven of them.

The alleged absence of the EPA's personnel is particularly alarming given the inevitability of an environmental catastrophe. Rising floodwaters haven't just swamped Superfund sites but also private-sector oil and chemical plants, forcing oil and chemical companies to work diligently to prevent massive chemical explosions like those that rocked an Arkema refinery in Crosby, Texas, on August 31st. Arkema wound up evacuating personnel, adopting a "wait and see" posture that all but guaranteed future conflagrations, and declined to share details of the "noxious" chemicals on site, but at least they showed up; the EPA's sluggish and remote presence feels like Bush surveying the devastation of Katrina from the comfort of Air Force One—strategic inaction from afar.

## **IT APPEARS TRUMP AND PRUITT ARE ESSENTIALLY REFUSING TO AVAIL THEMSELVES OF ONE OF THEIR MOST ESSENTIAL GOVERNMENT ORGANS.**

The implication of the AP report is clear: In matters of clean-up, the EPA is useless and, compared to the Federal Emergency Management Agency or the Coast Guard, not even worth sending to the Gulf Coast. EPA head Scott Pruitt, who the AP notes called cleaning up Superfund sites a "top priority," shares Trump's conviction that Americans are "tired of seeing billions of dollars drained from our economy due to unnecessary [environmental] regulations," as he's said in the past. Trump and Pruitt want to make the EPA disappear—and reports of the

agency's apparent absence from Superfund sites helps underscore the consequences of its withdrawal from public life.

This is unsurprising, given Trump and Pruitt's shared history of climate denialism and governmental obstructionism. Forget the government's abdication of its role on the global stage with Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate accord; the White House spent the weeks leading up to Harvey eviscerating the federal government's ability to anticipate and prepare for the environmentally influenced natural disasters—which, that is to say, includes every natural disaster facing the United States for the next four generations.

The irony is that Trump and Pruitt, in their efforts to essentially dismantle the EPA, appear to reveal an ignorance as to what the agency actually does. The EPA doesn't just sound off on environmental malfeasance (or, as some House Republicans like to call it, act like a "helicopter mom"); it is often also the primary first responder for domestic chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) events.

The EPA's role in CBRN response and recovery is not unlike the Department of Energy's custody of the U.S. nuclear stockpile: understated yet critical. Even though the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, and State are the primary strategic commands when it comes to the most worrying domestic and international CBRN incidents—for example, terror attacks—Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford affirmed in a September of 2016 statement of doctrine that the EPA will frequently take the lead in on-the-ground responses in both accidents and deliberate cases, coordinating hazardous waste disposal and laying a framework for the decontamination of an affected area, and "train[ing] other U.S. departments and agencies to prepare for such emergencies."

Before Harvey, Pruitt and his ilk believed the EPA's involvement would only stymie the economic engine of places like Harris County; in the storm's aftermath, it appears Trump and Pruitt are essentially refusing to avail themselves of one of their most essential government organs—a paradox given Trump's propensity to adopt liberal positions when they're framed in a national security context, like LGBT rights after the 2016 shooting at an Orlando nightclub.

One has to wonder if, despite Pruitt's internal dismantling of the EPA, Dunford could induce Trump to see the EPA as a weapon to be wielded as commander-in-chief, rather than an obstacle to economic growth.

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